

Cry Havoc

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Summary: Hiccup doesn't give up that easily ... and despite everything he has to do to prepare the raid on the dragons' island, Stoick still has time to think.

Cry Havoc

\_Beowulf maÃ°elode, beotwordum sprÃ|c  
>niehtstan siÃ°e: "Ic geneÃ°de fela<br>guÃ°a on geogoÃ°e; gyt ic  
wylle,  
>frod folces weard fÃ|Ã°e secan,<br>mÃ|rÃ°u frimman, gif mec se  
mansceaÃ°a  
>of eorÃ° sele ut geseceÃ°."<em>

â€œ \_Beowulf,\_ lines 2510-2515

Stoick was planning a war.

The others called it a raid, but Berk hadn't mounted a raid on this scale in living memory. Every seaworthy vessel larger than a skiff was being readied for battle, its ballast replaced with stone shot for the catapults. Mail-coats were burnished until each link shone, shields repainted in colors as proud as their owners' boasts. In every house the whetstone sang against the edges of sword-blade and spear-blade, rising like the drone of a sack-pipe above the woeful screeching from the dragon pens.

The Night Fury led that fell din, its snarls fitfully giving way to long, keening groans that shivered a man's ribs. The other dragons answered with a racket of shrieks and whistles and wails like the death-song of the gale that shreds a ship's rigging and drives it onto the rocks. The keepers could do nothing to stop the noise, but when they'd complained it was driving them mad, Stoick had ordered the bee-skeps stripped of enough wax to plug the ears of everyone on the pens. Now they went about their work with the slightly distracted look of those shut up with their own thoughts while the rest of the

village gave them and their charges a wide berth.

Stoick knew that look all too well.

He sat in his carved high seat in the mead-hall and listened to Spitelout and Phlegma argue over victualing the fleet without paying either warrior's words much mind. True, the last hunt for the dragons' nest had wandered the sail-roads for week after bootless week, but this time they'd have the Night Fury to guide them through Helheim's Gate. And Gobber had said that Hiccup (Stoick's nails dug into the boar-headed knobs that capped the chair's arms) only went missing afternoons, never overnight. Where a cursed dragon could fly in a few hours, a good Viking ship could sail in a day. And since the beasts knew nothing of siege warfare, any battle would be short and hot. We'll bring no more than field rations, Stoick thought, putting his left hand to his mouth to suck a bloody splinter out of his thumb.

He was drawing breath to end the wrangle when the doors to the hall were flung open with a rafter-rattling crash. Spitelout jumped at the interruption and Phlegma cursed (she'd been winning the argument), but Stoick only frowned as gangly Oddi, the youngest of the dragon keepers, marched in with air of mingled pride and panic. At his heels hopped Gobber, close as a noonday shadow and as little heeded. "Oh, for the love of â€" wait!" the one-legged, hook-handed smith protested as Oddi announced, "Stoick! I bring ill news!"

The combined glare of his elders shriveled his self-importance; he gaped under their scowls like a dead fish drying in the sun. Gobber smacked the back of his head. "I know you were raised in a barn, lad, but try for some manners, eh?" he scolded and spat into the rushes at the keeper's feet for emphasis. "Sorry, Stoick â€" it's all the excitement â€" I'll just see the boy back to the pens â€" "

"But I have to tell him!" said Oddi, scratching wax out of one ear.

Gobber snagged the boy's arm with his hook and pulled him toward the doors. "It can wait. He's busy right now â€" "

"No, it can't!" insisted Oddi.

He planted his heels, as balky as any sheep on the island â€" and probably as smart, Stoick thought, exasperated. He glowered at Gobber, who returned a what-can-you-do-with-'em? shrug. Time was wasting. He'd already burned too much coddling Spitelout's and Phlegma's pride by pretending to hear their advice; he had none to spare for another boy's folly. "Not now, Oddi," he growled. "If the dragons don't need you, the catapults do. Gobber, send him up to help dismount number three." And if manhandling that unwieldy hulk down to the harbor didn't teach him not to storm in upon his chief in council like a ram turned out among the ewes, nothing would.

"Right you are!" replied Gobber with a grin as relieved as it was evil. Stoick lifted a curious brow at his old friend, but the smith was busy transferring his grip from Oddi's arm to his collar. "Come now, lad â€" "

"But it was Hiccup!" Oddi blurted out. "At the pens!"

Gobber's hook dropped to his side and every glance in the hall knifed Stoick.

The chief knew what his people were whispering about Hiccup — Thor's beard, they'd shouted it at him in the kill ring before Stoick had hauled the boy away. Bewitched! they'd cried, making the sign of the hammer. The Night Fury has him spell-snared! And by the time the keepers had confined the unchancy beast to a pen, no one doubted it had caught Hiccup's soul in its gaze, as green as young alder leaves and as dazzling as stars against that night-dark hide. Don't look at its eyes! the keepers warned, as if that were lore straight out of The Book of Dragons. Not that the counsels of lore would have forestalled Hiccup. Freyr's balls, the boy would probably have tried to outstare the dragon just to test the point. That was the problem: you couldn't tell him anything ...

It's not my problem now.

"What about Hiccup?" Stoick asked, his voice colorless.

Oddi blinked, late to the insight that his news might be unwelcome. "Uh, he, uh," he stammered. "We-ell —" He paused and swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing like a chunk of driftwood in a swell, then admitted in a rush,

"We-caught-him-trying-to-sneak-into-the-Night-Fury's-pen."

"But don't worry, Stoick!" Gobber leaped into the breach Oddi's words opened, thrusting his chest out virtuously. "I gave the boy a boot up the arse and told him not to do it again!"

Stoick almost laughed, black and bitter. Tell the tide not to turn while you're about it. If the boy were truly bespelled, they could only trust the Gothi to discover a stave to draw against the dragon's wiles. But if not ... Hiccup had been Gobber's apprentice for seven years. The smith knew him as well as anyone — better than Stoick himself, perhaps. "And what were you doing there?" he asked.

Gobber blinked, too, but only in seeming surprise. "Why, taking measurements for the harness you wanted," he answered, drawing a knotted cord from his belt and dangling it before his chief as evidence.

Only just now? A sea-harness for the Night Fury had been one of the first things Stoick had ordered after the morning's disaster; by the canted fall of light through the mead-hall's high windows, the hour was well past noon. He stared at the smith, who returned the look guilelessly, though his remaining foot dug through the rushes on which he stood until it scraped the flagstone beneath. "Are you done with the beast?" Stoick asked at length.

"Aye," replied Gobber cautiously.

Stoick turned to Oddi. "Double the guard on the pens," he commanded, his voice booming through the hall like the crack of melting sea-ice. "No one gets near that devil until I come to fetch it."

"Aye, Stoick!" Oddi squeaked. Stoick jerked his chin at the doors and the keeper all but tripped over his own feet scrambling for the threshold. Gobber sighed and limped after him. The heavy oak panels swung shut slowly enough behind them for Stoick to catch the smith

offering Oddi a lesson in courtesy, or maybe prudence. As the keeper's voice gurgled apologies from the water butt, Stoick trusted they'd both remember the boy had an errand to run.

He bent his gaze on Phlegma and Spitelout. "Field rations only," he said. "See to it."

Spitelout squared his shoulders, ready to disagree further, but Phlegma elbowed him hard in the gut. "Yes, Stoick," she answered as the taller warrior doubled over, coughing. Then, taking firm hold of Spitelout's arm, she frog-marched him out of the hall.

Solitude wrapped Stoick close in the wake of their going â€“ a threadbare cloak, good for nothing but show against the chill. He bowed his head, propping it on his hands. What am I doing? he thought, but that wasn't the right question, because he knew what he was doing: he was planning a war.

He was going to find the nest and take it.

He was going to kill every dragon roosting there.

He was going to cut the Night Fury's heart out and hang it on a tree for Odin Allfather and Asa-Thor.

And none of that would be enough.

Because he knew that what ailed Hiccup was no spell, but something bred in the bone. Stoick had coddled him as if he were a wreckling who only needed a firm hand and feeding up, when all the while he'd been a cuckoo among sparrows, a fox raised by hounds â€“ a boy who pleaded Please, don't hurt Toothless! with his voice screwed to the same desperate pitch in which he'd begged the dragon to spare Stoick's life.

As if he loved the one no better than the other.

Stoick surged to his feet. There'd be time to sit later, while he sharpened his axe and oiled the braided leather of his war-hammer's grip. Now he needed to make the rounds of his shipmasters and hearten them for the grim work ahead. He strode across the hall and threw open the doors, squinting in the sudden strong light. The sun hung low above the glimmering sea; soon the first shadows of evening would creep over the island. Along its green slopes the villagers scurried from task to task like ants whose hill has been vexed to fury by rumors of another hill nearby.

Even ants understood war.

Stoick swaggered down the path to the harbor with the dragons' damned howls skirling behind him.

\_Swa biÃ° geomorlic gomelum ceorle  
>to gebidanne, Ã¾Ã¶t his byre ride<br>giong on galgan; Ã¾onne he gyd  
wrece,  
>sarigne sang, Ã¾onne his sunu hangaÃ°<br>hrefne to hroÃ°re, on he  
him helpe ne mÃ¶g,  
>eald ond infrod, Ã¾lige gefremman. <em>

â€“ Beowulf, lines 2444-2449

End  
file.